ADAPTING SUBURBS

IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

The familiar suburban landscape has provided access to "the American Dream" for generations. It evolved during decades of access to cheap oil, cheap credit, cheap land, and cheap water. While it has produced many beloved neighborhoods, the prospect of higher costs for all of the above raises questions about its future as a model for continued growth and for the future of many of these now-aging places. As vacancies in commercial suburban developments proliferate, what opportunities for adaptation are provided in the dead malls, zombie strip centers, see-through office park buildings, "ghost" big boxes, and the acres of parking lots that surround them? Can these properties be retrofitted into healthy places that better accommodate 21st century households? Adaptation is key to the survival of any species and this is the future challenge for suburban areas throughout the United States, particularly those characterized by single-use zoning, low-density development, and extreme auto-dependency. These features make it difficult to support mass transit alternatives or to find neighborhoods where residents can walk to buy a newspaper or a gallon of milk, needs that will become ever more pressing as gas prices escalate and residents age-in-place and are longer able to drive.

The projects shown here have adapted to these challenges through "suburban retrofitting," a transformative process of converting underperforming sites to new, more productive uses that are pedestrian-friendly and environmentally-sensitive. In our research, we identify three main approaches to retrofitting our least sustainable suburban landscapes into places that are more sustainable, more adaptable, more walkable, more transit-oriented, and more public-oriented. First there is redevelopment, or urbanization of a failed suburban site by increasing density, introducing a mix of different, complementary uses, and by supporting walkability with an interconnected grid of streets with sidewalks and pedestrian paths. The second approach is re-inhabitation, or various forms of adaptive reuse of vacant buildings, typically involving a shift from a commercial use to a community-serving one. And third is regreening, which ranges from introducing small civic parks and plazas, to restoring wetland ecologies or other key links in ecosystem chains that were interrupted by previous, insensitive development. Many retrofits mix and match these approaches.

DESIGN SOLUTIONS FOR RE-DEVELOPMENT, RE-GREENING & RE-INHABITING OUR SUBURBAN LANDSCAPES TOWARD A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE.

The projects featured in this exhibition represent a first generation of adaptive suburban retrofits that, for the most part, have already been built in existing suburbs throughout the U.S. Many take advantage of the relative centrality of first-ring suburban locations and the growing market for more urban housing alternatives amongst suburban young professionals and retiring baby boomers. All are providing their communities with new strategies for evolution that lead to planting trees on former parking lots, rather than plowing them down at the metropolitan fringes. It will be exciting to see the new urban design solutions that emerge in response to these examples as we advance through this century, striving to meet its many challenges.

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